

More "About Dickens."

HENRY LEFFMANN.

Dickens' Picture of the French Revolution.

Read Before the Philadelphia Branch of The Dickens Fellowship.

The French Revolution is, in some respects, a unique movement in history. Many political and religious upheavals have been marked by bloodshed, spoliation, and almost complete anarchy, but in most cases the severe measures have been visited upon the uprising people and not upon those against which the uprising was directed. In the French Revolution, the main objects of the liberators had been accomplished before the so-called "Terror" was established. The monarch had been deposed, the remnants of the feudal system uprooted, and the frame of a constitutional government developed, which, while it did not do much to enfranchise the true proletariat,

did materially limit the power of the formerly privileged classes. Yet, owing to peculiar conditions, the brutality of the controlling element increased, and the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, so much vaunted by the revolutionists, were violated.

We would do, however, great injustice to the leaders of the "Terror" if we judged them by the ordinary standards. The conditions preceding the revolution were exceptional; some that developed during its progress were equally exceptional, and (to borrow a metaphor from bacteriology) from an unusual culture-medium, unusual growths must be expected.

English-speaking readers have long been misled in their views of events that occurred in France between the middle of July, 1789, and the middle of Thermidor, 1794—the fall of the Bastille and the fall of Robespierre. Our pictures of the period have come to us mostly through English writers, nearly all of whom are so deeply tinctured with a belief in the sanctity of a hereditary monarchy and the necessity for privileged classes that they are scarcely capable of presenting, with fairness, the history of a government that cut off the head of one of the Lord's anointed and dispersed his nobles.

Of late years, American readers at least are able to get away from the apron-strings of our English cousins and study the French Revolution from our

republican point of view, discussing the execution of the Bourbon as an abstract question of justice and expediency. Like John of Brent:

“Little we reck * * * * *
* * * * * of long descent,
Nor wot we how a name—a word—
Makes clansmen vassals to a lord.”

So far as the period of the “Terror” is concerned, we cannot but regret its occurrence and condemn the methods upon which it largely depended, but we must not overlook the peril in which the Republic was placed by efforts of some nations to re-establish the objectionable Bourbon dynasty, promoted as such efforts were by the machinations of the members of the aristocracy then scattered through the capitals of Europe, or, as Dickens so strikingly expresses this feature, “August of the year 1792 was come, and Monseigneur was by this time scattered far and wide.” To enable the newly born republic to meet its external enemies without fear of internal treachery, a severe discipline was necessary, and we can understand, even though we cannot approve, the remark of Barère, “Let terror be the order of the day.” Nor can we fully understand the period without a good deal of knowledge of the preceding misgovernment, “the old régime,” as it is called. This was marked by almost every form of brutality and oppression. Unjust taxation in its worst form, namely, through the farming out of the revenue,

monopolies, corrupt ecclesiastics, and gross immorality of the aristocracy and court, although, it is true, the King himself was better than the run of the Bourbons. Perhaps Dickens has expressed as well as any one the conditions of the old régime:

“Along the Paris streets the death-carts rumble, hollow and harsh. Six tumbrils carry the day’s wine to La Guillotine. All the devouring and insatiate monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realization, Guillotine.”

“Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter, Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilettes of flaring Jezebels, the churches that are not my father’s house but dens of thieves, the hut of millions of starving peasants.”

Economic influences are known to be much more powerful in bringing about political and religious upheavals than was formerly supposed. We are accustomed to think of the American revolution as a spontaneous uprising of all classes against taxation without representation, and against a hereditary monarchy, but as a matter of fact it was largely a middle-class movement, and when it closed, the middle class was in control. So far from the American leaders being intensely

opposed to a hereditary monarch, there is no reasonable doubt that if Washington had been willing to accept the regency, a constitutional monarchy would have been established. Papers that have recently come to light show that prominent American statesmen endeavored to induce Prince Henry of Prussia, brother of Frederick the Great, to be a candidate for the American throne, but he suggested that a prince of the French house should be chosen, as likely to be more acceptable to the American people. If this latter plan had been carried out, and a French Bourbon installed as our first monarch about 1785, the breaking out of the French Revolution would soon have developed a pretty "kettle of fish" in the diplomatic relations of the new kingdom with the monarchies of Europe.

Turning to the novel, I wish to say, first, that I do not understand the statement in the preface that it was while acting a part in Wilkie Collins' drama, "The Frozen Deep," that Dickens conceived the idea of writing the story, but as I know nothing of this play, my failure to understand the allusion is easily explained.

Much difference of opinion prevails as to the merits of "A Tale of Two Cities." Many regard it as Dickens' best novel; others think it quite inferior. The late Albert H. Smyth, whose "Life of Franklin" will alone entitle him to permanently high fame in literature, once said that as a picture

of the French Revolution the novel is "trash," but I cannot at all accept this opinion. I think that "A Tale of Two Cities" carefully studied gives vividly some characteristic features of the period within which its action occurred. Of course, there are peculiar and improbable situations, but all fiction must resort to such. The presence of Jerry Cruncher and Miss Pross in Paris seems very strange, and we can hardly believe that Dr. Manette in his cell—105 North Tower—would have been able to write out the long account of the circumstances that led to his arrest and imprisonment that Citizen Defarge read to the tribunal.

Time will not permit more than brief mention of a few of the points in which it seems to me Dickens portrays correctly the events of the period. It is called a tale of two cities, but London and Paris are mere lay figures, the essence of the novel being the tale of two periods—the "Old Régime" and the "Terror." Dickens was so distinctly national that, even in a novel that was intended to portray an incident in French history, he must employ largely English characters and the general plan must be worked out on English principles.

The novel opens with an interesting picture of the brutality and crudeness of English life, and the bigotry, squalor, and oppression in French life in the latter half of the eighteenth century. There

is a philosophic picture of that fermenting condition of both nations in the opening paragraphs. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

"There were a King with a large jaw and a queen with a plain face on the throne of England; there were a King with a large jaw and a queen with a fair face on the throne of France. In both countries it was clearer than crystal, to the Lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes, that things in general were settled for ever."

After the presentation of characters such as Jerry Cruncher and Jarvis Lorry in the true Dickensian vein, the scene is shifted to the Bastille quarter of Paris, and the hideous features of the old régime are set forth brilliantly. However much I may read of more or less veracious history of the Terror, I do not lose sight of Defarge of the wine shop, the knitting mistress of it, and the several Jacques who frequent it. By various

recitals we get in brief form pictures of the sufferings of the proletariat, the unrestrained oppression by the landed aristocracy and the subservience of the King and Court to all these abuses.

Our first glimpse of the old régime is in company with Mr. Lorry and Miss Manette. Two more glimpses are given, one at the wine-shop and the other in the home of a feudal lord. The next shift of scene to France is suddenly from Dr. Manette's home to the front of the Bastille. The revolution has begun, and in the utterances of Dérargue and his followers when they are seeking 105 North Tower, we see the premonition of the Terror. A special chapter is devoted to a dramatic picture of the local outbreaks that are known to historians as the "War against the Castles." One of the most realistic touches is in the account of the first trial of Charles Darnay, when the president of the Revolutionary Tribunal is questioning him. During this examination the crowd in the court room is turbulent, and at one point the novelist remarks, "The populace cried enthusiastically, 'No!' and the president rang his bell to quiet them. Which it did not, for they continued to cry 'No!' until they left off of their own will."

We have in this brief paragraph an artistic touch, for it shows the populace growing out of the control of even its wild leaders.

In many phrases we see the evidence of that

extraordinary grasp of detail that has been aptly termed the "camera mind." I have only space and time for one. Note, for instance, the question of Mrs. Defarge when her husband has just been talking to the guard: "Say then, what did Jacques of the barrier say to thee?" In this sentence the characteristic French idioms appear, especially the use of the pronoun of the second person, so unusual even in intimate family intercourse in English speech, and so invariable in the similar relations in other European tongues. Not the least of the touches of appreciation of the French Revolution has seemed to me an allusion, in one of the other novels, "Little Dorrit," in which he expresses, through the mouth of Mr. Meagles, the opinion that the Marseillaise is the most insurrectionary tune in the world. I have always felt that if any tune could induce me to grasp a gun and rush to the firing-line it would be the Marseillaise.

It was pointed out in an article some years ago in *THE DICKENSIAN* that Dickens has suffered a good deal at the hands of his illustrators. The earlier novels were illustrated by caricaturists and cartoonists, and the pictures are often extravagant and even hideous. Illustrations have a great influence on most readers, and to understand how much more satisfactory the earlier characters would have been if drawn by accomplished artists we have but to compare the pictures of

Pickwick and Oliver Twist with Luke Fildes' illustrations in "Edwin Drood." I refer to this fact because a serious error has been made in one of the illustrations in the novel under consideration here. In the scene before Defarge's wine-shop, when the cask of wine is broken, one of the crowd dips his fingers in the liquor and writes the word "Blood" on a wall. The artist has drawn a wretched proletarian writing this word in English, which is, of course, absurd. We cannot, however, hold the novelist entirely irresponsible, for he was guilty of inaccuracy in assuming that such a man could write any word in any language. That incident cannot be regarded as presenting a phase of the "old régime," but, taken as a whole, I believe that a careful reading of "A Tale of Two Cities" will give as good a picture of the period it covers as can be obtained in a work of fiction.